

The Immutable Self within us¹

B Mahadevan²

Developments in modern medicine and health systems have resulted in a general increase in the life span of human beings. The average life span of human beings is now nearly 78 years. Despite this all living beings are subjected to a universal law, which any amount of scientific discovery cannot challenge. All of us inevitably go through the birth and death cycle. The only difference is the available span of time between these two events. Some live for long, in excess of 90 years and many live for about 60 – 65 years. When this thought overwhelms us it instills a sense of fear in us. We do not know when death will strike us, we also do not know what happens to us after death. Thus the fear of the unknown and the uncertainty of the event are both the source for our discomfort when we think about this issue.

We also have another dimension to our life. Look at our aspirations and priorities in life. We make serious efforts and work hard to acquire greater wealth (bank balance, a carefully planned and closely monitored investment portfolio), immovable assets (couple of apartments in big cities, a farm house in the country side, time share in holiday resorts, some plots in a new layout in an upcoming city, agricultural land, to name a few), power, position and importance in the society, friendship with power centres, politicians, and police and proximity to religious heads and opinion makers. All these point to a tremendous sense of permanence we assume about life that death is almost an impossible event. If death can strike us at any time, then all these appear illogical given the magnitude of hardship we go through in attaining these.

In reality, our life is a chain of thoughts that straddle between these two extremes. We neither subscribe to both the thoughts fully nor do we disown these thoughts altogether. In essence we have real confusions about what is life, what is the destination in our life etc. In a very practical way, instead of confronting these conflicting ideas head on and developing clarity on the issue, we merely avoid and deflect our thoughts elsewhere. The easiest way to do that is to pick the remote control and switch on the TV. The unfolding drama in the TV serial relieves us of this uneasiness and helps us escape from the drama of our own life.

How can we develop some understanding about this issue? Will it help us resolve some of the confusions that we are going through in our life? Let us turn our attention towards *Bhagavad Gitā* and see what Lord Krishna has to say on this subject.

Understanding our true self

Ancient Indian wisdom provides a rich discussion on this subject and has provided multiple perspectives and clarifications on this issue. Our ancestors have recognized the existence of *ātman* (known as soul in common parlance) distinctively separate from the gross body and

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2013). "The immutable self within us", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 10 (7), March, 2013, pp 15 – 16.

² B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

have repeatedly pointed out that the attributes of the *ātman* are very different from that of the body. Lord Krishna brings this out in a concise manner. The self within us undergoes neither birth (*na jāyate*) nor death (*na mriyate*) at any time (*kadācit*). The notion of past, present or the future does not apply to it (*nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ*). From this description it further follows that it is beyond the realm of birth (*ajāḥ*), it is ever present (*nityaḥ*), permanent (*śāśvataḥ*) and very ancient (*purāṇaḥ*). Finally the implication of all these descriptions is that such a self will not perish (*na hanyate*) even when the body in which it resides is bound to get destroyed (*hanyamāne śarīre*).

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचित् नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ 2.20

na jāyate mriyate va kadācit nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre

These descriptions suggest that death is not an end for us but one of the several milestones in our journey. This provides some interesting perspectives to the life that we lead. We shall see two of them.

Developing the mindset of a traveler

Imagine a traveler undertaking a long journey towards a final destination. First of all his approach to planning the journey will be different. He will not carry too much luggage, lest his journey is burdensome and slow. He will think twice before he includes things in his luggage so that it is light. Also, by not carrying too many things, he lessens his pressure to guard his luggage against possible theft. He also does not need to engage a porter every time he needs to transport his luggage. During the course of the journey, the traveler visits several cities and stays there for the night. When it is the dawn time the traveler resumes the journey. Imagine the mindset of the traveler. Although he may come across a number of people, entities and interesting things and events, his sense of entitlement of things that he comes across will be very minimum and only to the extent of practically helping him carry on his journey.

We are all like the travelers described above. Each pair of birth and death (called a *Janma*) is like one leg of the journey with a night stay in a city. If only we are able to organize many things in our life in the manner the traveler does, will our journey be fruitful and progressive.

Being a Tenant

The mindset of a tenant of a house is very different from that of a house owner. A house owner is very emotionally attached to the house and identifies fully with the house. A scratch on a newly painted wall is like a scratch on the house owner's skin. If there is a pending issue (such as incomplete and abandoned work by the carpenter or an upcoming tax assessment by a surveyor of the city corporation) it can easily unsettle the house owner and induce tension and sleeplessness. None of these issues bother a tenant of the house.

The sense of entitlement is almost nil as far as the house is concerned. The tenant also knows that he will vacate the house one day. Therefore the tenant is able to comfortably wade through similar events as they unfold when he is living in the house. It is extremely interesting to notice that until we own a car we suffer from all problems of ownership. However, the moment we sell the car our perspective towards the same car changes dramatically as somebody owns it from then on. We develop a tenant relationship to it.

Our life must be viewed exactly in the same fashion. The real "I" is the atman and it has temporarily rented out a space called body. If we develop the tenant perspective we may be able to handle many issues in life more comfortably.

Understanding the immutable nature of the self within us and contemplating deep on this thought can provide many perspectives of life and help us understand the purpose and meaning of life. It can help us set right priorities. This indeed is at the core of our own evolution.